

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000509

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: FORMER HEAD OF STATE THINKS OBASANJO SHOULD FORGET SECOND TERM

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason 1.6 x6

¶1. (C) Summary: During a February 1 breakfast meeting, former military Head of State Abdulsalami Abubakar told Ambassador Jeter that President Obasanjo meant well but has performed badly the past several months. Obasanjo's sincere intentions have been betrayed by his abrasive manner and by maladroit decisions that have alienated many supporters. With his stature in the Northwest and Southeast significantly eroded, Obasanjo would be hard-pressed to duplicate his 1999 electoral victory in 2003. Because Obasanjo's candidacy would now be divisive, Abubakar hoped the President would follow the example of Nelson Mandela and not seek a second term. The former Head of State also warned that, despite the National Assembly's excision of the clause barring new parties from the 2003 national and state elections, the electoral law still contained provisions that could precipitate major constitutional and political crises. Abubakar also expressed annoyance at the recent suit filed against him and other former Nigerian military Heads of State by Southwest-based politicians for alleged human rights abuses and the death of putative 1993 electoral victor, Moshood Abiola. Abubakar's comments on his role in the DROC peace process and in Zimbabwe will be reported septel. End Summary.

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A Historic Opportunity Being Squandered  
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¶2. (C) During a February 1 breakfast at the Ambassador's residence, a relaxed, avuncular Abubakar commented that President Obasanjo had the best interests of Nigeria at heart and was a patriot who thought of Nigeria first. There was no other figure who could have assumed the Presidency in 1999 without having further convulsed an already frail body politic. Nigeria would have been worse off without Obasanjo, he maintained. Generous and brief, these encomiums were the prelude to a tactful but harsh critique of the Obasanjo Presidency.

¶3. (C) Abubakar believed that Obasanjo's utility as a stabilizing force had waned; in fact, the President appeared to have forgotten his mandate. Obasanjo's task when elected was to advance the democratic transition the 1999 elections had set in motion. In 1999, civilian politicians united to escort the military from office. However, they had no program beyond the military's ejection. As President, it was incumbent on Obasanjo to stand above the fray of power politics and forge a national consensus around key issues. His mandate was to guide the nation down the critical path to genuine democratization. He should have focused his attention as well as sacrificed his ambitions to the building of republican institutions and a democratic political culture. Instead, Obasanjo had sunk into the thick of political mudslinging and intrigue, Abubakar complained. Meanwhile, his Administration had no domestic social and economic policy focus. Unlike a good general, Obasanjo was operating on multiple fronts, dealing with too many issues simultaneously. By trying to do everything himself and failing to delegate sufficiently, Obasanjo has achieved little except generate resentment among the political elite and frustration among Nigerians in general.

¶4. (C) However, Obasanjo's greatest self-disservice, according to Abubakar, has been his combative style and disdain for compromise and dialogue. Obasanjo thinks he is omniscient and does not need to listen, the former Head of State emphasized. Preferring to surround himself with second-rate hacks who echo his tune, Obasanjo has banished independent-minded advisors like Patrick Dele Cole who could have helped him from stumbling into the recent spate of political miscalculations, such as the electoral law.

¶5. (C) For Abubakar, the electoral law represents Obasanjo's biggest recent political blunder. Abubakar was nonplussed by Obasanjo's alleged personal involvement in the unseemly

inclusion in that law of the prohibition against new political parties in the 2003 elections. By inserting his hand in this roiling pot, Obasanjo singed both his pride and prestige, thus lowering his stature as President. The President's involvement in this backroom meddling strengthened his critics in and out of his party, the PDP.

16. (C) Abubakar continued that the President's involvement in the electoral law controversy strongly suggested that Obasanjo sought to bar new parties to lessen competition and assure his reelection. However, slipping that prohibition into the law after the measure had been passed by the National Assembly had backfired severely. Not only was there a sustained public hue and cry, but all 36 Governors filed suit against the measure's postponement of local elections from April 2002 to 2003, while Senator Arthur Nzeribe filed a companion case against the ban on political parties. Meanwhile, the two houses of the National Assembly voted to repeal the ban on new parties. But these "cleansed" bills have not been forwarded to the President for his assent. Consequently, no one really knows if there is an electoral law or not. Abubakar feared a major constitutional showdown if some governors make good their threats to hold local elections this year in face of the federal government's insistence that it, not the states, had the authority to determine the date for local elections. Such a standoff between Governors and the President, Abubakar predicted, would fog an already dense political atmosphere.

17. (C) Abubakar added that the Governors would not have felt the need to hold local elections in 2002 but for their fear that Obasanjo is actively trying to engineer the demise of governors he dislikes, even those in his own party. Holding local elections prior to the national polls would strengthen the Governors' position in influencing all subsequent elections in their states, including the Presidential contest. Conversely, should the Presidential election occur first, the bandwagon effect would dictate that contestants in the subsequent state and local elections would need the imprimatur of the President-elect to maximize their chances for victory. (Comment: In Nigeria, once people know who the President will be, they flock to his party and its candidates at all levels in hopes that their support for the winning team will translate into lucrative favors from government. End comment.)

18. (C) Despite his manipulations, Obasanjo's chances to reclaim the presidency were fading; in fact, Abubakar thought that Obasanjo has suffered a major loss of political goodwill. Three years ago, he was a unifying force, someone in whom all major political constituencies reposed a degree of confidence. Then, he was perceived as de-tribalized, and his lack of support in the Southwest actually strengthened his hand on the national stage. Unfortunately, Obasanjo's personality could not tolerate losing his home region to those he saw as his inferiors. Consequently, he has focused too much attention on garnering support in his ethnic backyard.

19. (C) Any incremental support gained in the Southwest came at the expense of alienating key segments of the North and Southeast. Obasanjo had paid scant attention to the North, and any meaningful policy initiative or infrastructure project in that region was the work of state governors not the federal government. Moreover, Obasanjo was dismissive of Northern opinion leaders; he failed to meet and when he met, he failed to listen, Abubakar quipped. Abubakar noted that the Constitution provided for the President to confer with former Heads of State, but only two such meetings had occurred. Both times, Obasanjo treated his predecessors to long monologues that precluded any exchange of views. All of the other former Heads of State were Northerners, except for the deferential Ernest Shonekan, Abubakar, wryly remarked.

10 (C) Abubakar contended that Obasanjo grievously erred if he thought keeping Atiku Abubakar as his running mate would ensure significant Northern support. Atiku's name does not resonate beyond his native state, Adamawa. To Abubakar, the trappings of office appeared to have rendered both Obasanjo and Atiku so heady that they forgot the electoral formula (and its chemists, primarily Northern power brokers) that ensured their victory. Additionally, Abubakar surmised, there might be growing tension between Obasanjo and Atiku. In private talks, the Vice President acted as if he would be running for the top office next year but Obasanjo's actions suggest that he is not heading for the sidelines.

11. (C) Compounding his electoral challenge, Obasanjo's disapproval rating in the Southeast now ran high. Obasanjo had hurt himself by engaging in a running public feud with

charismatic Abia state governor Orji Kalu. Each skirmish with Kalu rubbed too many Igbos the wrong way. Although not every Igbo supported the flamboyant governor, many saw him as a spokesperson for Igbo political aspirations. The more Obasanjo upbraided Kalu, the more the President was seen as being against an independent Igbo politician rising to national prominence, reinforcing the sentiment that Igbos remain marginalized as a result of the civil war thirty years ago.

¶12. (C) Unwittingly, postulated Abubakar, Obasanjo was constructing a scenario familiar to Nigerian politics but one that would leave him the odd man out. Spurned by a sense of estrangement from the Presidential Villa, more Northern and Southeastern politicians were talking to each other. Abubakar foresaw a possible North-Southeast alignment against Obasanjo, the Southwesterner. (Comment: If the North and Southeast ally against him, Obasanjo would be in the same corner that kept Awolowo from finding the Presidential grail. Moreover, Obasanjo would not be able to count on the keep, abiding support of his fellow Yoruba that Awolowo had. End Comment.)

¶13. (C) As evidence of the North-Southeast axis, Abubakar said the yet-to-be registered party, UNDP, was born in the North but was gaining support in the Southeast. When Ambassador Jeter mentioned the rumor that the UNDP was brainchild of former Head of State Babangida, Abubakar did not deny that his close friend was the money behind the UNDP. He did state, however, his uncertainty about Babangida's electoral plans; Abubakar himself was trying to figure out if Minna's more famous favorite son would dive into the electoral fray.

¶14. (C) Because Obasanjo's candidacy now would be ethnically and regionally divisive, Abubakar thought Obasanjo should stand down and not run again. As has been raised in the print media recently, Abubakar hoped Obasanjo would take the "Mandela option." The problem was that Obasanjo was so obdurate that he would not even listen to Mandela, much less follow him.

¶15. (C) Abubakar did not have many salutary things to say about the three registered parties. Obasanjo's desire to have a chokehold on party operations had demoralized and divided the ruling PDP. Some party members were talking about the need to jettison Obasanjo or find breathing space for themselves in another party. The AD was too subservient to Yoruba socio-cultural interests such as Afenifere, and therefore, could not make headway outside the Southwest. The APP was wracked by internal dissent, some engineered by Obasanjo, the rest self-inflicted. In short, the political landscape had deep pocks that needed to be filled or the upcoming electoral campaign would be an unsteady, tumultuous ride for the entire nation, Abubakar felt.

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On A More Personal Note  
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¶16. (C) Abubakar stated that unexpectedly he had been handed a court summons during a recent visit to Chicago. The suit was brought in the US District Court of the Eastern District of Michigan. Plaintiffs included NADECO stalwarts Gani Fawahinmi and Anthony Enahoro. The gravamen of the complaint was the detention of these plaintiffs and the death of Moshood Abiola, were both human rights abuses punishable under federal law. Former Heads of State Buhari, Babangida and Shonekan also were named codefendants. Visibly annoyed, Abubakar contended he was the "last Head of State that should be accused of human rights abuses" since he released dozens of political prisoners from detention, including some of the plaintiffs, and was preparing for Abiola's release when the latter died. Abubakar contended that the suit was not a fitting reward for having been the general who voluntarily returned the reins of government to civilian hands. Now the Yoruba-dominated NADECO group, still seething that Abiola was not allowed the Presidency, wanted to embarrass Abubakar, the other former Heads of State, and Nigeria. He claimed the plaintiffs seek to convict the entire history of military rule and have raised issues dating back to the 1966 coup. He said that he would enlist the Ministry of Justice to help defend the case since it was Nigeria more so than he that would be on trial in this "political case."

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COMMENT  
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¶17. (C) Abubakar may have one or two personal bones to pick

with Obasanjo. For instance, Abubakar believes that Obasanjo wanted him, Babangida and Buhari to testify before the Human Rights "Oputa" Panel so that they would receive public blows to their prestige through questioning by hostile lawyers about Abiola's death, corruption and human rights abuses during the years of military rule. (Abubakar and the other Northern Heads of State refused to appear at the Oputa hearings.) Despite this perception, Abubakar's indictment of Obasanjo did not seem to be fueled by personal rancor. Instead, it probably reflects the views of many in the Northern elite. Perhaps more importantly, what Abubakar said probably reflects the mindset of Ibrahim Babangida, a much more powerful and unforgiving personality who may emerge as Obasanjo's real political nemesis in the months leading up to the Presidential elections.

Jeter